

CHICAGO
LITERARY
CLUB

IN MEMORIAM
—
ROBERT COLLYER

CHICAGO
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



Robert College

IN MEMORIAM
ROBERT COLLYER

FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE
CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

BORN DECEMBER 8, 1823

DIED DECEMBER 1, 1912




CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
1913

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THIS memorial was prepared by a committee composed of Samuel S. Greeley, William Eliot Furness, Edward O. Brown, and Charles Edward Cheney, and was read at the meeting of the Club held on Monday evening, January 27, 1913.



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IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT COLLYER

ROBERT COLLYER, first president of the Chicago Literary Club, was born in the little village of Keighley in the West Riding of Yorkshire, England, on December eighth, 1823; he died in New York on December first, 1912.

Mr. Collyer's parents were working people of a type superior in intelligence and character. Both of them worked in the linen mills from childhood to marriage. The mother tended a loom; the father was the blacksmith. It was the dawn of the new industrial day. New inventions and new processes of manufacture increased the output, and stimulated the demand for labor. The Napoleonic wars of twenty years before had drained away the young manhood of Europe, causing a scarcity of hands. Every idle hand was needed, and the burden fell heavily upon childhood.

Little Robert, eight years old, was placed with many others as young, in the mill to tend a loom thirteen hours a day for six days per week, with two hours off on Saturday. At fourteen, deciding to follow the trade of his father, he was apprenticed to a blacksmith in a neighboring town.

The family had their birthright in the old parish church, where the parents were married, and where the children were baptized, but they usually attended the Methodist chapel on the hill. Neither the father or the mother made profession of religion.

Robert's official education was mainly limited to attendance at night school for several winters during the early part of his apprenticeship. His real mental and moral training was got in the wholesome atmosphere of the Yorkshire cottage, in the stern discipline of factory and forge, and in the few books which his slender means allowed him to buy and such as he was able to borrow.

There was a small store of books in the house; among them were Bunyan's

Pilgrim, Robinson Crusoe, and Goldsmith's Histories of Greece and Rome: These he almost got by heart. The rest were religious books; "they did not suit me," he writes, "so I let them hang on the shelf." From these books and others loaned or given by friends, he drew his life-long love for simple Saxon words and phrases.

While still working at the forge he was licensed as a Methodist local preacher, and preached, sometimes in chapels, sometimes in kitchens, in that region.

In April, 1850, he married and sailed with his wife for the United States, where he continued to preach to Methodist congregations, supporting his family by working at the forge, and at such other jobs as offered. The new land offered a wider outlook, and furnished new friends who were not bound by the creeds and conventions of the churches he had known in the homeland. Association with these, a wider range of reading, and some specially lurid sermons which he then heard from a Methodist preacher brought about a

change in his views, and he formally withdrew from the Methodist connection and affiliated with the Unitarian church in Chicago, to become its "minister at large," to oversee its work for social betterment.

In May, 1859, he became pastor of Unity Church in Chicago, but he was far more than that. He was a recognized force in the civic life of his adopted city and country. When the civil war broke out he went as a volunteer nurse to care for the sick and wounded soldiers at Fort Donelson and on the Potomac, and he did efficient service for the government and the United States Sanitary Commission. After the great Chicago fire of 1871, Mr. Collyer worked actively with the Relief and Aid Society in relieving distress and distributing the vast aid fund given by the world's charity in of the stricken city.

As might be expected from his early training in home and shop, his theory of life was thoroughly democratic. He loved common things and the plain people: he found "sermons in stones,

books in the running brooks, and good in every thing." He had the rare power of visualizing persons and things, and making his audience see them as he saw them.

His genial, helpful, cosmopolitan spirit was felt by all with whom he came in contact. A member of the committee writes thus: "The impression which Mr. Collyer left upon my memory was that of an unusual largeness of heart, tender sympathy with suffering, an especial interest in young people, and a geniality which drew to him with magnetic attraction the rich and the poor alike. His mind was singularly poetic in its cast. A certain poetic interpretation of everything in nature, in history and in current events, was the dominating feature of the addresses which I had the pleasure and privilege of hearing. Every citizen of Chicago — no matter what his religious, political or social predilections — who came into touch with Mr. Collyer, even in the most casual way, could not help feeling for him that confidence and affection which a

big, generous and loyal nature never fails to inspire."

A note from another testifies to Mr. Collyer's interest in young men. He writes: "My college classmate and I came to Chicago, in 1872, bearing letters to Mr. Collyer from friends in New England. When we went to his house to present our letters he happened to be out. We thought our letters might draw from him a note expressing his interest and asking us to call. What was our surprise when on one of the hottest summer days a week later Mr. Collyer came toiling up to our room on an upper floor to return our call. From that time till he left Chicago, we were both on terms of close acquaintance with him, and he was most helpful in suggestions morally, intellectually and materially. Thereafter I was a frequent visitor at his house, where I met the most interesting people I have known. My visits being generally on Sunday, I often met Europeans and Orientals, who came to visit one already known to them by his writings. A noted guest was Mrs.

Leonowens, sometime English governess at the court of Siam. There were actors, clergymen, authors and statesmen—groups such as now might hardly be found assembled except at Hull House.”

During a pastorate of twenty years, Mr. Collyer served his church and his city loyally and diligently; then, feeling that a change was necessary for himself, and perhaps desirable for the church, he resigned his charge and accepted a call to the Church of the Messiah in New York, a charge which ended only with his life.

Mr. Collyer was one of a small group of men called in council by the original proponents of this club, to assist in its organization: he was elected its first president and remained its fast friend and supporter to the end.

After his removal from Chicago he visited the club twice or thrice — the last time on the special invitation of the club. On these occasions he addressed us with all his old time pathos and fervor, making us feel that we were still the comrades and friends of bygone days.

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